Introduction : identity, community, and comparative literature

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IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY
Constructions, Deconstructions, Reconstructions

Introduction
Identity, Community, and Comparative Literature

The interrelated essays that follow had their origin in a workshop of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) Committee on Literary Theory, hosted by the University of Western Ontario, Canada in May 2005. The annual workshops of the ICLA Theory Committee bring together Committee members and invited guests, including representatives of the host institution, in an international gathering devoted to intensive discussion of a theme proposed by the hosts and accepted by the Committee as consistent with its ongoing work. The theme of the 2005 workshop – "Identity and Community: Constructions, Deconstructions, Reconstructions" – besides being related to projects in the University of Western Ontario's Comparative Literature program, addressed issues of immediate relevance to Canada's multicultural society, as to the societies of the participants' home countries. The workshop itself represented a "community" comprising many nationalities (Australian, Canadian, Croatian, Danish, Finnish, German, Israeli, Korean, South African, and Swedish – without going into hyphenated identities). Cutting across these divergent national affiliations was the participants' shared identity as academic professionals and, more specifically, as comparatists – although they would ally themselves with widely different literary and cultural modes, not to mention theoretical orientations.

From a genealogical perspective, the phrase "Identity and Community" descends from a long line of related conceptual couplings: the one and the many, individual and society, subject and state. Yet what has been arguably most conspicuous in current critical debates, where the spectre of "identity politics" is much decried yet seemingly inescapable, is the realignment of identity away from the self-constituted individual – long epitomized by a male-centered, Western subjectivity – toward the differential attributes constitutive of particular groups. In other words, it has become difficult to think identity without community being always-already implicated, or to think a community that is not qualified, even fractured, by competing identity positions. The conjunction of the two terms in this set of essays proves at once delimiting and synergistic, as contributors approach a common cluster of problems from very different starting points: from critical cosmopolitanism to the production of narratable selves, from communities of taste to the mythic structures of family, from Native Canadian nomad networks to the apocatastatic communities of William Burroughs'

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novels, and from the shifting identity positions within "East Asia" to identity cards in the context of the Rwandan genocide. Since discussion of shared concerns is a primary aim of the Theory Committee's workshops, the contributors to this issue were asked to continue the intellectual exchange beyond the three days of the workshop itself by reading and reflecting on one another's written contributions, which were circulated among all of them in draft form. Cross-referenced and in dialogue with one another, the essays in this collection thus represent a communal effort from an internationally and theoretically diverse group of individual scholars.

Given the affiliation of all the contributors to the International Comparative Literature Association, a shared background question was what the discipline of Comparative Literature can bring to a rethinking of identity and community as current socio-political issues, and, conversely, how a focus on identity and community affects the methodology of Comparative Literature. Reingard Nethersole sets these questions front and centre in her opening essay, "Cosmopolitanism and Identity: Challenges for Comparative Literature." For a critical examination of the "new cosmopolitanism," Nethersole brings together recent works on cosmopolitan theory from postcolonial perspectives as well as from both Continental and Anglo-American philosophy. She examines how the economic processes of globalization, in eroding older models of subject-formation particular to the nation-state, have made possible a proliferation of groups defined on the basis on ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and other categories of cultural difference. In terms of the concept "identity," Locke's original emphasis on a spatial-temporal continuity of self has given way to the need for belonging to a given group, one which, under the guise of community, functions as a recognizable brand in the global marketplace. As Nethersole suggests, the return to cosmopolitanism by such critics as Jacques Derrida and Anthony Appiah represents at least as much a consequence of this global trend as it does a potential corrective. For Comparative Literature, with its orientation toward the multilingual and multicultural, Nethersole proposes a "critical cosmopolitanism," one that rejects "identity" – cosmopolitan or otherwise – as a regulative idea in favour of an ethics of hospitality modeled on encounters with the stranger and the foreigner. She stresses the need to maintain an openness toward these figures of alterity while suspending questions or assumptions about their identity-position.

The next two essays explore the concept of narrative identities from unexpected angles: it is not a matter, here, of monological self-narration, but of identities that are constructed through the processes of listening and reading. In his paper on "Narrative Identification," Vladimir Biti examines a recuperated ethics of the self, whose leading theorists include Levinas and the later Foucault. Biti focuses on the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero's recent attempt in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* to move beyond both classical and Nietzschean accounts

of the role that narrative plays in subject-formation. In contrast to the classical subject, who achieves a social identity through self-narration, Cavarero argues that the possibility of selfhood depends on the narrative input of others: I gain knowledge of myself only inasmuch as you, as Other, tell me my life story, a story in which I am placed in the second person. As Biti demonstrates, Cavarero avoids a Nietzschean (or early Foucauldian) reduction of subject-formation to a dissymmetry of power between storyteller and addressee. Narrative comes from without, but it is not therefore imposed on the self; on the contrary, I desire a permanent narration from the Other, with whom I am co-existent. Biti then analyzes and critiques Judith Butler's extended response to Cavarero, calling attention to the binaries that survive the otherwise deconstructive efforts of both theorists.

Anders Pettersson also investigates questions of identity through the interaction between narrator and addressee, this time in terms of "The Formative Influence of Literature." Drawing on empirical studies of the reading process, Pettersson examines the way in which readers interpret literary texts as statements about the real world. Pettersson proposes that such interpretation occurs primarily through analogy. By way of concrete examples and contrasts with competing theories (such as reader identification with characters), Pettersson argues that analogical thinking provides the most comprehensive explanation for how readers identify connections between literature and their life-world, suggesting in turn how such thinking contributes to the formation of larger reading communities.

The essays by Carmen Barbu and John Vanderheide shift the emphasis from identity to community, and from narrative processes to the philosophical import of specific literary works. Barbu and Vanderheide explore two very different meditations on the possibility of community in fictional texts, focusing, respectively, on a Kantian-inflected notion of aesthetic community in Franz Grillparzer and on the postmodern revolutionary community of William S. Burroughs. In her essay on Grillparzer's "Der arme Spielmann," Barbu revisits the Austrian writer's response to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* through his story of Jakob, the "poor musician" whose idiosyncratic music, despite hints of potential genius, fails to find a receptive audience even among his friends, including the narrator. Rather than choosing between Jakob and the narrator – a dramatist and the story's leading arbiter of taste – Barbu argues that the viability of both perspectives forces the reader to question the conditions under which any aesthetic community would be possible. Rejecting Kant's criterion of universality in matters of taste, Grillparzer further exposes a verbal bias in the philosopher's understanding of music's supposed ease of communicability. On close inspection, Jakob's music appears to be not simply incommunicable but – at the hands of an unreliable narrator – misrepresented, making the story as much an allegory of reading as it is an allegory of art.

In his paper on Burroughs, Vanderheide explores how the writer's late novels return to the ideal communities of myths of origin in attempting to create a "mythology for the space age." Vanderheide takes issue with Deleuze and Guattari's identification of Burroughs's literary enterprise as a "fascicular book" – that is, one which perpetuates a regressive, binary division of the world into natural and spiritual realms. Arguing in favor of a "functionalist" Burroughs whose fictional world relates to things in terms of their *purpose*, Vanderheide analyzes in particular the writer's struggle against "control societies" – a struggle as relevant now as it was during the Cold War. For Burroughs, however paradoxically, the mythic places that humanity imagines as its own origin serve the function of promoting its future evolution. Through a kind of apocatastasis, what would be restored through revolutionary practice are not these mythic places in themselves but the objective possibility of social change that they embody. Taken together, Barbu's reading of Grillparzer and Vanderheide's reading of Burroughs thus articulate very different literary responses to the project of Utopia. Whereas Grillparzer uses narrative means to undermine Kant's ideal community of taste, Burroughs exploits the potential of imaginative literature to lend substance and urgency to otherwise impossible worlds.

The above essays all explore interrelations between identity and community, albeit with telling differences in emphasis. While the first three essays address various forms of personal identity (cosmopolitan identity, narrative identity, and reader identification, respectively), Barbu and Vanderheide foreground philosophical issues of community in particular works of literature. In responding to the overall theme of identity and community, the contributors critically engage a series of overlapping yet distinct binaries: the general and the particular, the local and the global, the ethical and the political. The remaining four essays, on the other hand, represent compelling case studies involving specific ethnic identities. Far from merely corroborating theories of identity or community presented earlier in this issue, the specificity of each of these cases calls into question the terms in which a common dialogue around identity and community could be conducted.

In his essay on "The Condition of 'East Asia' Discourse," Sangjin Park diagnoses the crisis of identity and community facing the diverse ethnic groups comprising Japan, China, and Korea as they move beyond a traditional position as Other to the West. As Park argues, "East Asia" originates in the rhetoric of Western colonialism before being appropriated by emergent nation-states with imperialist designs of their own – a process manifested in Japan's 1943 "Declaration of Greater East Asia," but one that informs the construction of national identity in modern China and Korea as well. Park proposes a corrective to these discursive legacies by deconstructing the self-centered and homogenized identity of the nation-state in favour of a fluid, open, and process-oriented concept of identity grounded in the historical particularity of individual subjects. The

experience, emotion, and memory of individual subjects – taken as a basis for a new "East Asia" discourse – can be realized in real-life encounters as well as in literature, as Park demonstrates with reference to Yoko Kawashima Watkins' 1986 novel *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*. Besides reflecting more closely than any other contributor on the sub-heading of the conference theme – i.e., when, why, and how identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed – Park's discussion of East Asia discourse brings into play the ethical encounter among individuals in "post-national" contexts, as advocated in the essays by Reingard Nethersole and (in a different sense) Vladimir Biti.

Regna Darnell's contribution introduces the perspective of a social scientist and the issues of Canada's First Nations. In "First Nations Identity, Contemporary Interpretive Communities, and Nomadic Legacies," Darnell shows that First Nations interpretive communities reflect traditional cultural practices and the expressive and communicative styles of hereditary First Nations languages, even when the languages themselves have been all but lost. In designating these cultural practices as "nomadic," Darnell observes that this term carries very different connotations and contextualizations in First Nations communities than in mainstream English, leading to cross-cultural miscommunication over issues of mobility and settlement. A failure to recognize nomadic practices in new contexts undermines government policy, which continues to be based on settler assumptions. Contemporary theory – more particularly, Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* – likewise misunderstands nomadism even in valorizing it, again by failing to draw on the indigenous knowledge of contemporary nomad communities. In addition to explicating the connotations of nomadism within First Nations interpretive communities, and the problems that arise in its encounter with mainstream culture and policy, Darnell gestures toward the potential for revisionary encounters with indigenous knowledge: first in Rosi Braidotti's feminist understanding of the contemporary intellectual as nomadic subject, and, more generally, through the medium of literature itself.

In what is, as he notes, an intriguing and darkly ironic contrast with Darnell's work on the politics of Canadian First Nations identities, Robert Stockhammer offers compelling insight into the discourse of Rwandan identity during and after the genocide. Extending the methods of Comparative Literature to a non-literary "genre," Stockhammer analyzes the discursive features of the pre-1994 Rwandan identity card, a marker that the Belgian colonial administration had mandated for all Rwandans and whose first line – in French and (mistranslated) Kinyarwanda – served to identify its holders according to ethnicity. At roadblocks in the spring of 1994, armed militia divided whomever they encountered into the fixed categories marked, directly or obliquely, on these identity cards. As Stockhammer argues, the binary opposition "Hutu" and "Tutsi" undergirded an entire system of "administrative massacre." After the end of the civil war, on the other hand, the interim government, in a push toward reconciliation, barred the

terms "Hutu" and "Tutsi" from official discourse in favour of an inclusive "Rwandan" identity. In the final part of his essay, Stockhammer analyzes three recent books about the events of 1994, focusing on how each author grapples with a choice between two grim alternatives – to employ or elide the ethnic labels that fueled a genocide.

In a final case study drawn from an African context, Ulrike Kistner continues the exploration opened up by Darnell and Stockhammer into the problematic interface between identity politics and the politics of identification. Kistner's focus is not group identity, however, but the identity of a single individual: the teenager Happy Sindane, who entered a South African police station in 2003 to allege that he had been kidnapped as a child from white middle-class parents and thereafter raised in a poor, abusive black family. Kistner approaches Happy Sindane's story, which became a media sensation in post-apartheid South Africa, in psychoanalytic terms as a "family romance." In addition to demonstrating parallels between Happy Sindane's case and childhood fantasies involving the search for one's origins, Kistner draws on postcolonial theory to explore the role played by the visual perception of otherness, or phenotypical difference, in both childhood psychology and the social process of racialization. Legally and in the court of public opinion, the appropriate procedure for determining Happy Sindane's paternity lay with DNA testing (the results of which Kistner suggestively omits). Yet as Kistner demonstrates, just as race theory cannot ignore visible phenotypical difference, so, too, biogenetics cannot resolve, in a phylogenetic sense, the "psycho-sociopathic conundrum" surrounding Happy Sindane's originary identity.

These four case studies, truly global in their geographical reach, nevertheless sound common notes in the process of exploring the construction of identity and community through language, literature, and theory. They thereby revisit the issues raised by the earlier essays, particularly the necessity and the challenges of reading (whether novels, identity cards, or bodies), the imperative of an ethical encounter with otherness, as well as the need to come to terms with hyphenated and (in more than one sense) nomadic identities. In addressing these themes, the nine contributors are, of course, theorizing matters that are close to home for them – as indicated, at the very least, in the distance that many of them traveled to participate in the "Identity and Community" workshop. For the participants, who hailed from five continents, multilingual, hyphenated, and interdisciplinary identities – personal, professional, and national – are an everyday reality. A selection of their rich intellectual exchange is offered here under the auspices of the International Comparative Literature Association's diverse and enthusiastically dialogic working committee on literary theory.